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AUTHOR Pfister, Fred R.
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ABSTRACT

Teachers in all disciplines must demand good writing from students if they want their writing to improve. When good writing is demanded only in English classes, students develop a double standard for their writing. To make teachers in other departments aware of their responsibility for the quality of student writing, English teachers can take the offensive and ask what other departments are doing about writing standards. If plagiarism is a problem, the English department can prepare guidelines for avoiding plagiarism and make them available to other departments. Also, a common handbook of English usage can be used by all departments. To improve students' writing in content courses, English teachers can have them turn in a paper written for another class for an English grade. Another method, planned by the School of the Ozarks, is to postpone the second half of the freshman composition course until students are juniors, so that writing may be coordinated with classes in students' major fields. Finally, departments may apply standardized gummed forms to students' themes, to indicate either that the teacher expects better writing in the future, has lowered the grade of the theme because of poor writing, or requires the student to discuss the theme with his or her rhetoric instructor and revise it. (GW)

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Fred R. Pfister

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Your Best Defense is a Good Offense:
Involving Other Disciplines in Teaching Writing Skills

by
Dr. Fred R. Pfister

I'm sick and tired of hearing that Johnny can't write and having the ques-
tion "Why can't Johnny write?" put to me. Maybe I'm partly to blame, but I
can--and will--shift part of the blame to high school teachers, who in turn
will shift part of it to junior high and grade school teachers, ad infinitum,
ad nauseam. However, I know where a good deal of the blame on the college
level belongs, and it doesn't belong in the composition classroom.

At the University of Mississippi when I was finishing my doctorate, I
often heard such complaints about Ole Miss's "Billy Joes" not writing up to the
quality expected of college students from one teacher in the faculty lounge,
yet this same teacher did not grade essay answers or reports or themes on the
basis of grammar, spelling, and mechanics because he was "interested in con-
tent." As long as the errors in English didn't "drastically interfere with
the idea attempted to be communicated," the writing was acceptable in his class.
I've heard his remarks echoed at least a dozen times by teachers of a half a
dozen different disciplines since I've gotten my degree.

Of course his Billy Joes and our Johnnies won't be able to write if they
are expected to write well only in freshman composition classes. Students do
not write any better than they have to.¹ And often they have a double set of
standards for their writing. The better one they use for their composition class.
The other one they use for all their other teachers or the classes they think

¹ Pfister's Laws (to be added to Murphy's Law and its amendments and
carolaries)

- A. Quality of writing of any given assignment will only be as good as
the standards demanded by the author and his audience.
- B. A theme will take exactly as long as the time you give to have it
completed.

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they can get away with it. And the sad fact is that they all too often do get away with it--and right there the composition class and the composition teacher are compromised.

It is my opinion that most students can write at least passably well when they know their writing will be rated partly on its English; therefore, I have initiated a one man attack--program--initiative--whichever you want to call it--to get other departments involved in teaching writing skills or at least making them aware of the responsibility they have in order to maintain and cultivate writing standards. There are several thrusts to my attack, and several battle plans are in the planning stage.

One is not to take the total blame because Johnny can't write. In the faculty lounge, I don't take the defensive, I take the offensive and ask, "What are you other departments doing to require good standards of writing? Do you ever give any essay tests? Do you require reports or papers? If a research paper is required, do you tell students how important form is? How much grammar and spelling are going to count?" Start asking those questions yourself. You might be surprised--in some cases shocked--by some of the answers.

Some of my fellow instructors in various departments had complained about getting papers that were plagiarized. I found out that when they assigned a paper, nothing was mentioned to students about plagiarism and how to avoid it; the instructors assumed it was something "they had been taught and had learned in freshman composition." Our double standard was at work again. Some students reasoned that remarks made about plagiarism applied only to the composition classes. So the English Department defined plagiarism and set down the penalties in the college's Student Handbook. The Department prepared a three page handout for freshman composition students defining plagiarism, giving examples of it, and explained how and why it is to be avoided. We now make these handouts available to other

departments. Standards for good writing are now being reinforced by other instructors in other departments.

Also helpful is getting a common handbook for the college and getting copies of that handbook to members of the various departments. This method could be expensive, but most publishers, if they learn that the handbook is being used college-wide, would be willing to provide complimentary copies. We use Edward J. Corbett's Little Rhetoric and Handbook. It has a key inside the back cover that refers to the Handbook for certain types of errors. If instructors grade papers with this key in front of them, they can refer students to the Handbook by merely writing a number in the margin near the error. Since the English Department uses the same technique, the students' writing and the demand for quality are reinforced. Since a method is being used that the students are familiar with, they benefit. The instructor benefits because he saves time and doesn't merely mark an error but provides information to the student how not to make the same mistake-- if the student is conscientious and refers to the Handbook. The English Department benefits because it gets a little support and because just a little more of the double standard in writing is chipped away.

Still another method is to get your students to turn in a paper written for another class for an English grade. (Often they don't want to because they have the double standard.) Let instructors know that you are willing to grade a writing assignment of a student in their class as a grade and assignment in English. Again, because I teach at a small college, this method works well for me. Many of my students have a required speech class, a required religion class, and a required history class, among others. I ask for their schedules at the beginning of the semester and usually find that three or four teachers have everyone of my composition students. It is easy to set up an assignment from three instructors from their classes that I can grade as an English assignment. They have remarked that the quality of the writing improves dramatically when the students know they will also be getting a grade in the English class for a particular assignment.

This improvement probably results because they use the better half of their "double standard" of writing, a sort of "If I'm going to kill two birds with one stone, I'll throw my best rock" thinking. Whatever the reasoning or cause, this method makes for improvement.

Still another method our department at the School of the Ozarks plans to involve other departments in the teaching of writing and to maintain writing standards is to change our two-course Freshman English Program. We plan to keep our two-course program, but delay the second course until students are juniors. We believe this will help them because they will have greater maturity and will better recognize the need to write well. They will also be well into their individual disciplines and majors, and writing assignments will be such that they will be writing about their disciplines. Because the classes will be smaller (the theory being that most of the students who just can't hack college work will have dropped out before they are juniors), we will have more time to devote to the students and their problems, and more importantly, we will be able to coordinate the writing class with their other classes in their major. This grand experiment begins this fall. Give me a call in two years, and I'll tell you how successful--or unsuccessful--it has been.

A method which James B. Stronks advocates and one which intrigues me is "the yellow slip method." I hope that we can, with some modifications, institute it in our college.

Stronks' method at the University of Chicago was extremely simple. Violently yellow, gummed slips of paper three inches wide and six inches long were supplied to all members of all Departments. At the top of the slip, in bold, boldface, embarrassing capitals was "THE ENGLISH IN THIS PAPER IS NOT ACCEPTABLE." Below, in ballot-like boxes which could be quickly checked by a busy instructor, were three alternative choices.

Number one was "It appears to be the result of carelessness. In the future,

I will expect you to write with more care." The second was harsher: "The English in this paper is so poor that your grade has been lowered. It would pay you to write with more care." The third choice suggested that the student take the paper to his rhetoric instructor and discuss it and return it with corrections within the next week.

The important point of this program, I believe, is its simplicity. The instructor who gets a paper with poor writing--in history, education, biology, whatever--can stick the slip on and make a checkmark in a matter of seconds. This simple act--even if the instructor does not write a single word on the paper--puts pressure on the student to write better the next time. Everyone benefits. The student benefits because he performs better; his instructor benefits because his problems are fewer. The English Department gets a little practical support. Most important, this method makes other departments aware of the importance of writing.

The best defense is a good offense. By not being so defensive and apologetic about the quality of student writing, we should take the offense and ask questions, get other departments involved, make other disciplines aware that they too are involved and not merely concerned with the quality of student writing. Then, and only then, will Johnny be able to write better.

Involving Other Disciplines in Teaching Writing Skills

a brief bibliography by

Dr. Fred R. Pfister
Assistant Professor of English
The School of the Ozarks

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